

SPIRITUALITY OF THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH

(ST THOMAS CHRISTIANS)

The Syro-Malabar Church believes that the Christ-Experience of the Apostle Thomas forms part of its original patrimony and hence of its spirituality. The risen Lord touches the heart of Thomas telling “do not be faithless but believing” and then the Apostle has no more the need of any tangible experience but answers in deep faith “My Lord and My God”. This spirituality of Thomas is the very life-breath of the Thomas Christians. It is nothing other than the spirituality of Jesus Himself, that is, to keep the commandment of the Father, abide in His love, and to do all that is pleasing to Him. This heredity is lived on in the tradition of the St Thomas Christians.

Passionate Attachment of the Christians to their Father in Faith

A few examples are: people and parishes named after him and pilgrimage to the tomb of St Thomas and to the churches dedicated to his name. The spiritual heritage designated by the term ‘Law of Thomas’ comprises the whole of their Christian patrimony, of faith, liturgy, ecclesiastical system, ascetical practices, Church discipline, customs and laws. It refers to their specific mode of living as a Church community with a spirituality and identity of its own, distinct from the ‘Law of Peter’ followed by the Latin missionaries who arrived in Kerala in the 16th century. This term ‘Law of Thomas’ was employed to prove their stand against Latinization forced upon them by the western missionaries.

CERTAIN TRAITS OF ST THOMAS CHRISTIANS’ SPIRITUALITY

The basic trends of Eastern spirituality as biblical and liturgical, ecclesial and sacramental, practical and experiential, mystical and ascetical can be seen in the spiritual life of St Thomas Christians.

1. Spirituality based on Liturgy and Sacraments

With the Chaldean Church St Thomas Christians share the East Syriac liturgy perhaps from the 4th or 5th century. They have a Eucharist centred spirituality. Attendance at the Eucharistic celebration (Holy Qurbana) on Sundays and feast days belongs to their life norms. It has been testified by a number of western missionaries who visited India in the 16th century. Participation in the Divine Liturgy and frequent reception of the sacrament of penance form a strong basis for their spirituality. Solemn recitation of the divine praises (liturgy of the hours) especially in priestly and religious formation centres is one of the most important schedules of the day.

Catechetical instruction to children and youth are an inseparable part of Sunday observance. We have catechism classes from preparatory to grade 12 with a well planned syllabus.

2. Spirituality built upon the culture of the land

Interiority, importance of the heart, sense of the sacred, love of nature, emphasis on self-renunciation, ascetical practices, importance of a Guru (teacher), life based on dharma (duty), concept of nonviolence, etc. are some of the characteristics of Indian spirituality. These

spiritual and cultural elements of the home land have played a great role in the formation of the spirituality of the Thomas Christians. Indian culture integrated with the Christian faith is the uniqueness of the St Thomas Christian spirituality.

3. Spirituality rooted in the rigorous life of fasting and penance

The western missionaries who visited India in the 16th century have testified to the life of fasting and prayer of the Thomas Christians. They used to abstain from delicious food articles like meat, fish, egg, milk and milk products during the seasons of fast chiefly twenty five days before Christmas and fifty days before Easter. They joined fasting with long prayers and almsgiving. These practices are still very strong among us even in Australia.

4. Spirituality outpouring in the acts of charity

Mercy and kindness towards the poor has always an important place in the life of the Thomas Christians. There have been poor families supported by the rich with shelter and food. Now, organized way of doing charity is existing in all dioceses and parishes.

5. Spirituality enshrined in the devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary and saints

Devotion to Mary has always been very strong among the Thomas Christians. Majority of the churches of the Thomas Christians are dedicated to Mary. All the Marian feasts are celebrated with great solemnity. Eight days of fast and prayer are observed before the feast of Nativity (September 8th) and fifteen days of fast before the feast of Assumption (August 15th). Later, the feast of Immaculate Conception (December 8th) was also introduced.

Feasts of saints especially of the patron saint of the parish are celebrated with great enthusiasm. Long prayers and colourful procession carrying the relic of the saint accompanied by the play of musical instruments are still kept alive.

Thomas Christians including the laity are very much interested in participating frequently in spiritual retreats like Bible conventions, residential retreats, *tapas* (fasting) retreats, Jesus youth camps, Eucharistic adorations, novenas, night vigils, etc.

There are 3 canonically declared saints, 2 blessed, 2 venerables and 13 servants of God from the Syro-Malabar Church.

6. Spirituality following the footsteps of the saints

The Thomas Christians are very much interested in making pilgrimages after due spiritual preparation. Their main pilgrim centres are dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Thomas, the Apostle. Visiting the churches dedicated to St George is also an ancient custom. Now, pilgrimages to the tombs of St Alphonsa, St Kuriakose Elias, St Euphrasia and those of the blessed have become very common.

7. Spirituality outshined in the vocation to priesthood and consecrated life

The number of the Syro-Malabar faithful all over the world is 4.5 million. There are 7945 priests (4205 diocesan & 3740 religious), 34147 religious sisters and 1214 major seminarians in this Church.

8. Spirituality Practised in the Family

8.1. Faith filled Family Events

For the Thomas Christians, home is the place where faith is born, nourished and transmitted. They give a religious dimension to every event in the family. Name of Jesus Christ is recited while the new born child is fed. Children are initiated into the letters of the alphabet with special prayers. In order to strengthen family ties, infants are given the names of their paternal and maternal grandparents. The relation between the husband and wife is considered very sacred and, therefore, divorce is not very common among them. Remarriage after the death of a young partner is very rare. The remaining partner leads an ascetical life praying for the departed person.

When death is imminent, the names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph are whispered into the ears of the dying person. After the death and burial of a person, there are some fixed dates such as 7th, 9th, 11th, 41st, etc. of prayer for the departed one. The close relatives of the dead practice penance and abstain from food materials like meat, fish, milk, etc. during those days. The anniversary of death is commemorated as a feast in the family to which all close relatives are invited, and the priest officiates with special prayers. They give alms and food to the poor in the name of the departed person.

8.2. Family prayer

In the evenings all members of the family gather to pray. Now, the main item of the prayer is rosary. The prayers are concluded with the reading of the gospel. Then all children greet the parents first and then each other with folded hands saying 'praise be to Jesus Christ'. Every major event in the family is begun with prayer. People start living in new houses only after getting them blessed by priests.

Conclusion

The spirituality of St Thomas Christians emerging from the mingling of the Catholic faith, the Oriental form of worship and the Indian culture appears to be an ideal one. It is the fruit of the biblical and patristic synthesis of the Catholic faith which came through the Apostle Thomas and the East Syriac fathers. It maintains the vertical and horizontal relations of man in balance, in the sense that, through fasting and prayer man purifies his heart, makes his relationship with God very close and intimate. Through the works of mercy, almsgiving and righteousness he regulates and strengthens his relations with his fellowmen.

Now, the Syro-Malabar Catholics in Australia learn to live in the culture of this land with our Catholic faith, oriental worship and Indian heritage. It is our mission and challenge. Our community is not very old in Australia, say 10 to 15 years. The first generation takes great interest to live the spirituality which they have acquired from India. We succeed to great extent

in providing pastoral care to them. Our second generation is being trained to adopt the spirituality of our Church and to adapt it to their life situations in Australia. Liturgical services and catechetical instruction in English, youth retreats, participation of the youth in family units, debates on faith related issues, formation of Syro-Malabar youth movements, catechism day organized by the kids, etc. are some of the activities for the second generation.

We firmly believe that we have much to contribute to the vast Australian community and to receive from it which is multicultural. When our children share of their religious practice to their peers in schools they receive manifold response. Certain kids are inspired to practice their faith and persuade their parents. A few ridicule them on being religious. Some maintain an indifferent attitude. Experience of our adults who work with the wider Australian community is also almost the same. We try to fulfil our two fold mission: one to keep our faithful in the faith handed down to us by our forefathers and another is to transmit this spirituality to the wide Australian community. We humbly acknowledge that it is no easy task in a country like Australia where the number of people who claim “no religion” has overtaken Catholics.

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